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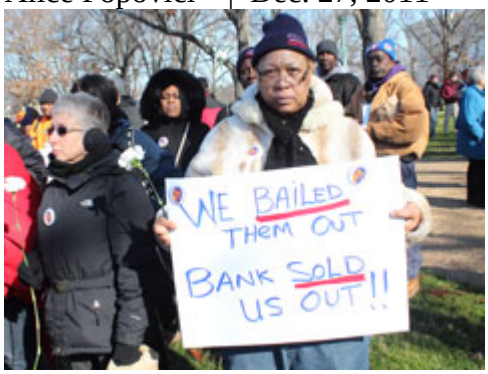
Vigil calls for extended jobless benefits

Alice Popovici | Dec. 27, 2011



A protester holds up a sign during the Dec. 8 prayer vigil near the U.S. Capitol in Washington. (Alice Popovici)

WASHINGTON -- Ever since Shonda Sneed of Yellow Springs, Ohio, lost her engineering job two years ago, she has depended on unemployment benefits to support herself and her 81-year-old mother. ?I loved working,? she told a crowd of hundreds of people gathered recently near the U.S. Capitol at a prayer vigil calling on lawmakers to extend benefits for millions of jobless workers. ?Honestly,? she said, ?I feel like the American dream is slipping out of my hands.?

After speeches by Christian, Jewish and Muslim faith leaders who called for justice for the millions of Americans who are barely getting by, the peaceful crowd, carrying white carnations, marched toward the Capitol. They chanted in unison and waved handmade signs that said ?Jobs now? and ?People over profits.? On the steps leading to the dome, a few of the protesters held up a large piece of fabric that read ?99% TAKE BACK THE CAPITOL? while the rest took turns tossing their carnations toward it.

Meanwhile, Sneed and several others walked to their representatives? offices to try to share their stories. Speaking by phone later, she said she had wanted to explain her situation personally to Ohio Republican Sen. Rob Portman, but he wouldn?t see her. Instead, she spoke with one of his aides, and told him that the unemployment money is, for her and her mother, ?a lifeline that?s keeping us off the street, that?s keeping us fed this winter,? and that this safety net will disappear when her benefits -- and those of millions of other unemployed Americans -- expire Dec. 31. She asked him if the senator?s office has a plan. She told him, ?I?m disappointed.?

The sentiment was echoed by others at the prayer vigil Dec. 8, on the fourth day of the ?Take Back the Capitol? rally organized by union groups. The rally is estimated to have brought together about 3,000 people in Washington, including many Occupy protesters. They came mainly to ask Congress to extend unemployment benefits for more than 2 million workers who will lose them by the end of December, and as they walked after the vigil many said what has been said before -- that communities are hurting, that roads and bridges are crumbling, and that lawmakers refuse to listen -- but some seemed to be losing their confidence that things can change for the better.

Edward Mattos, a 65-year-old unemployed ironworker from Rockville, Md., said he voted for President Barack

Obama in 2008, but ?I?ll stay home this time.? Since Mattos lost his job last year, he has been living off of the pension he accrued during his 40 years as a member of the International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental and Reinforcing Iron Workers. He said he is not struggling to the extent others are, but he and his wife still have a mortgage to pay off, as well as their children?s college educations. ?I think, in his heart, he wants to do things,? Mattos said of the president, ?but he doesn?t have the spine for it.?

Raheem Crawford, 28, of Pittsburgh, said he blames lawmakers, not Obama, for ignoring the fact that families in his community can?t afford to buy food, and at least one high school has closed.

?We?re tired of being broke, and we?re tired of being stepped on by executives and senators,? said Crawford, who owns a construction company and said he can?t make a living if his clients are losing their homes. ?It?s a lot of stuff that?s going on, and they?re not even thinking about doing anything to help us out financially or morally.?

Mattos and Crawford said they had not watched the speech Obama delivered in Osawatomie, Kan., on Dec. 6, in which he spoke of fairness and equality, weaving through, as many have pointed out, some of the themes of the Occupy movements that have taken root throughout the U.S. and in Europe (see analysis on Page 1).

?We simply cannot return to this brand of ?You?re on your own? economics if we?re serious about rebuilding the middle class in this country,? Obama said, according to the White House transcript. ?We know that it doesn?t result in a strong economy. It results in an economy that invests too little in its people and in its future. We know it doesn?t result in a prosperity that trickles down. It results in a prosperity that?s enjoyed by fewer and fewer of our citizens.?

Sneed, the unemployed engineering worker from Ohio, said she believes the president is doing his best. When he spoke in Cincinnati in September, promoting the jobs bill that he said would put people to work rebuilding the country?s infrastructure, she said she had thought a job working on the Brent Spence Bridge was within her reach.

?That would have put me back to work, that would have given me the money to take care of my mother, that would have given me back my dignity,? Sneed said. But instead of going back to work, Sneed said she and other unemployed workers are being used by Speaker John Boehner and others in Congress who did not pass the president?s bill.

?I am tired of being used as a pawn,? she said. ?They?re playing games because they want [Obama] to be a one-time president.?

The day after the prayer vigil, Boehner?s office released a bill that does extend unemployment benefits and the payroll tax cut. But the Middle Class Tax Relief and Job Creation Act also includes a provision for the controversial Keystone XL Pipeline from Canada to Texas, which environmental groups oppose and the president has promised to veto.

Supporters say the pipeline would create jobs.

?The president says that the American people ?can?t wait? for jobs,? Boehner said in a videotaped press conference Dec. 13. ?Well, clearly, if we pass this bill today we will be taking the first big step toward creating jobs in America, and it will be time for the United States Senate to act.?

But labor groups are not happy with the legislation, which they say would actually cut jobless benefits and hurt unemployed workers.

?Congress needs to stop playing politics -- there are millions of lives that are on the line,? said Kelly Fryer, a spokeswoman for Interfaith Worker Justice, one of the organizations that put together the prayer vigil in Washington.

Sneed, whose trip to attend the vigil was made possible by the union AFL-CIO (she is a member of Working America, one of its community affiliates), said she resents that unemployed workers are portrayed as lazy people who are looking for a handout. During her trip to Washington she said she met many people in her situation -- who receive unemployment benefits because they have no other choice, and are struggling to get by while they care for an elderly parent or a child with special needs.

?If we don?t tell our stories, they will think we don?t exist,? she said. ?I am tired -- we have had enough.?

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